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Viewing cable 09SANAA2040, SAUDI AIRSTRIKES AT YEMEN BORDER

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- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09SANAA2040	2009-11-09 13:33	2011-08-30 01:44	SECRET//NOFORN	Embassy Sanaa

Appears in these articles:

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SUBJECT: SAUDI AIRSTRIKES AT YEMEN BORDER

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Local sources confirm that Saudi Arabia continued to launch airstrikes against Houthi rebels in Jebel al-Dukhan area on the Saudi-Yemeni border, despite ROYG statements to the contrary. In an unusual twist, the Houthis

are now casting themselves as defenders of Yemen's sovereignty against an unwarranted Saudi attack, while President Saleh's public remarks point to his delight that the KSA has officially joined his war against the Houthis. While Saudi airstrikes may succeed in driving the Houthis from some of their border strongholds, they are unlikely to have much impact on the Sa'ada war without an accompanying ground invasion. END SUMMARY.

Local sources: saudi airstrikes continue, but where?

¶ 12. (C) In response to Houthi incursions into Saudi territory and a November 2 Houthi attack on Saudi border guards, Saudi Arabia continued to launch airstrikes against Houthi rebels in the Jebel al-Dukhan area on the Saudi-Yemeni border, local sources told PolOffs in early November. In contradiction to AP reports that Saudi Arabia regained control of contested Jebel al-Dukhan on November 8, the Houthis denied that the Saudis had taken the mountain, claiming they were still in control. Also on November 8, a ROYG aircraft crashed in Razih district (which borders Saudi Arabia to the north of Malahit); the Houthis took credit for downing it, while the ROYG claimed mechanical failure. Independent Yemeni journalists report that, contrary to official Saudi statements, Saudi airplanes have entered Yemeni airspace and hit targets inside of Yemen.xxxxx told PolOff on November 6 that the Saudi Air Force bombed Tihana, Malahit, and Hasama districts within Yemen. He also reported the Saudis were massing troops stationed near the border.xxxxx confirmed that airstrikes have occurred in Yemeni territory. "The Yemeni government denies this, but the Saudi government is acting in full coordination with the Yemeni government," he told PolOff on November 6.

¶ 13. (S/NF) The Houthis, too, have accused the Saudi Air Force of bombing Yemeni territory, including residential areas in al-Hattamah, al-Malahit, al-Hassamah, al-Majda'ah, and Ghamar, killing and wounding civilians in the latter. The Houthis also claimed to have captured some Saudi soldiers, which the SAG denied. (Note:xxxxx promised to air footage of the captured Saudi soldiers, but none has been broadcast to date. End Note.) UNHCR Representative Claire Bourgeois told PolOff that 135 families fleeing the area caught in the conflict arrived at the Mazraq IDP camp in Hajja governorate on November 7. "Seven hundred people - this is a huge increase in one day," she said. (Comment: Bourgeois expects a report from UNHCR on November 10 with the recent arrivals' eye-witness accounts from the conflict zone, which could provide more clarity on the fighting. End Comment.)

Border confusion...

¶ 14. (C) According to xxxx, the contested area in Jebel al-Dukhan is officially part of Saudi Arabia, but when the border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia was drawn through the area, it cut through the territory that had traditionally belonged to a Zaydi Yemeni tribe. He told PolOff on November 8 that because "tribal territories transcend international borders," the tribes living in that area consider it Yemeni even if it is officially Saudi. Furthermore, while the members of the tribe whose territory straddles the two countries identify first and foremost with their tribe, they identify secondly as Yemenis, not Saudis - regardless of which side of the border they live on. Adding to the confusion about whether Jebel al-Dukhan falls in Yemeni or Saudi territory is the fact that ROYG forces continue to fight throughout the area.

... And allegations of cross-border collaboration

¶ 15. (C) xxxx believes there was probably an agreement between the ROYG and KSA to encircle the Houthis by attacking them simultaneously from the north and the south. According to xxxx the SAG had granted the ROYG military access to Jebel al-Dukhan in order to gain leverage over the Houthis, but the Houthis were able to rout them, so the Saudis

launched airstrikes to clear Houthis from the area. The Houthis claimed to take control of Jebel al-Dukhan on November 2. In a telephone interview with al-Jazeera xxxxx accused the Saudis of allowing the Yemeni military to access Jebel al-Dukhan from the Saudi border in order to launch a counter-offensive to re-take the mountain. xxxxx said, "We do not target Saudi territory and we are not fighting them in their territory or in the areas under their control. The problem is that we are facing aggression, and there is clear cooperation between the Saudi regime and the Yemeni regime."

Houthis: we are defending yemen's sovereignty

¶6. (SBU) In an unusual twist, the Houthis are now casting themselves as defenders of Yemen's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In a November 6 statement, the Houthis accused the Saudis of launching a ground offensive into Yemen after heavy bombardment of the Malahit and Hassamah regions. The Houthis continued to deny having any presence in Saudi territory and claimed that "the Yemeni people will take a stand regarding these infringements on Yemen's sovereignty, and we hold the Saudi authorities fully responsible for the results of these uncalled for infringements on Yemen's sovereignty and territories."

Saleh: the war in sa'ada has only just begun

¶7. (C) Local observers report that President Saleh is thrilled that the Saudis have become militarily involved in the conflict. Saleh's enthusiasm was evident in his November 7 speech at a ceremony launching the first shipment of Yemen's liquefied natural gas project. He said the "real war" against the Houthis had begun only two days before) the day the Saudi airstrikes began. He described the previous six rounds of the Sa'ada war as "a rehearsal to test our capabilities," adding that the war will not end until the Houthis are crushed entirely. Abdullah Ahmed Ghanem, Chief of the Political Department of the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) party, agreed that Saudi involvement was a positive development. He told PolOff on November 9 that "Yemeni-Saudi relations are very good now, and because of this war they're going to get better and better. The Houthis are our joint enemy."

Yemenis weight in: what to expect from saudi involvement

¶8. (S/NF) xxxxx suspects the ROYG approached the Saudis and asked for their support because it is suffering tremendous losses in Sa'ada. According to xxxxx military sources, the ROYG has lost scores of military positions in Sa'ada governorate. "It's a big fiasco," he said, "and that's why (Saleh) wants Saudi involvement." xxxxx also noted that President Saleh is increasingly losing faith in his own military, which is another reason he needs Saudi help. The President has placed trusted family members at the helm of campaigns to retake embattled Malahit and Sa'ada City. According to Aden Press, President Saleh put his son Ahmad Ali Abdullah Saleh, commander of the Republican Guard, in charge of the military campaign in Malahit, taking it out of the hands of the ROYG military's Northwest Region commander Ali Muhsin. According to DAO reporting, the Ministry of Interior's (MOI) Yemeni Central Security Force) Counterterrorism Unit (CSF-CTU), led by presidential nephew Yahya Muhammad Abdullah Saleh, has been tasked with formulating an operational plan for clearing the Houthis from their stronghold in the old quarter of Sa'ada City.

¶9. (C) Some observers, such as xxxxx, believe Saudi military involvement will bring the war to a swifter conclusion. But others do not see Saudi involvement as a silver bullet. xxxxx expects Saudi involvement to continue, pointing to media reports that KSA is massing ground troops at the Saudi-Yemen border. In his view, the "big mobilization" of troops signals the intention to be engaged for a long time. He does not see a quick end to the war,

though, because it has expanded to include tribes whose territories span the Saudi-Yemeni border. With the tribal dynamics of blood feuds and revenge killings, "the Saudis have gotten themselves caught in a big swamp" from which it will be hard to extract themselves, he believes.

Comment

¶10. (C) By all accounts, the ROYG has welcomed Saudi involvement against the Houthis. The ROYG is likely to encourage the Saudis to deepen their involvement, perhaps by taking action in border areas north of Jebel al-Dukhan still under Houthi control. While Saudi involvement may succeed in driving the Houthis from some of their border strongholds, it is unlikely to substantially weaken them or have an impact on the overall war in Sa'ada. Continued Saudi military operations in the border regions could actually fuel the war, since the local populations have a great deal of distrust for central government authority, whether Saudi or Yemeni. END comment.

Seche